The Impact of School Closures on Homeless Students in New York City

SEPTEMBER 2010

an ICPH policy report

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School closings

1 Christopher Columbus High School*
1 Global Enterprises High School*
2 High School for Community Research and Learning
3 Monroe Academy for Business and Law
4 Frederick Douglas Academy III Secondary School
5 New Day Academy
6 Alfred E. Smith Career and Technical Education High School
7 Academy of Collaborative Education
8 Kappa II
9 Choir Academy of Harlem
10 Academy of Environmental Science High School
11 Norman Thomas High School
12 Metropolitan Corporate Academy
13 Paul Robeson High School
14 Middle School for Academic and Social Excellence
15 PS 332 Charles H. Houston
16 W. H. Maxwell Career and Technical Education High School
17 Jamaica High School
18 Business, Computer Application, and Entrepreneurship High School
19 Beach Channel High School

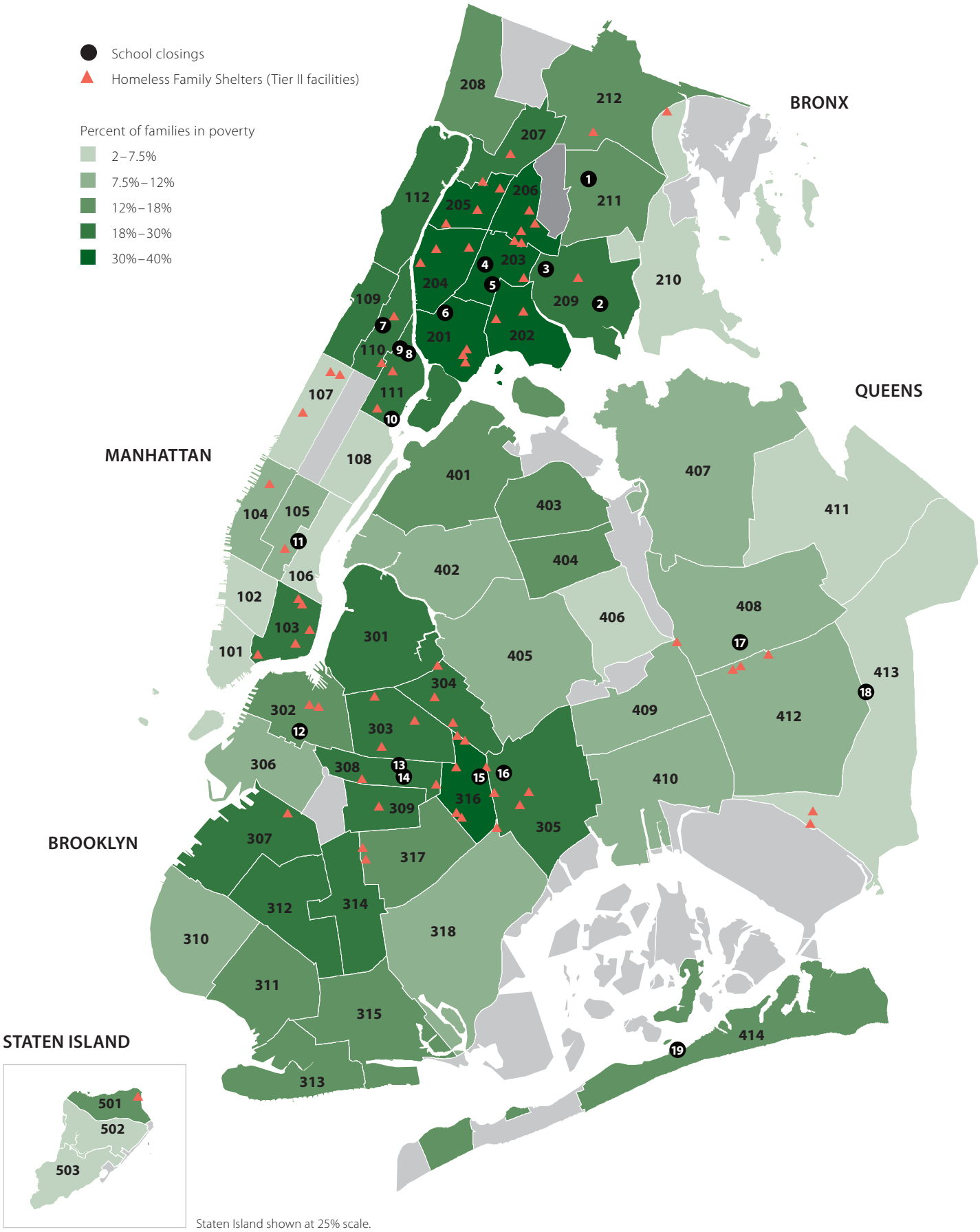
* Indicates separate schools at the same address.

Community districts (number, percent of families in poverty)

101 Financial District (1,437, 5.76%)
102 Greenwich Village/Soho (1,437, 5.76%)
103 Lower East Side/Chinatown (7,706, 24.72%)
104 Clinton/Chelsea (1,582, 8.32%)
105 Midtown (1,582, 8.32%)
106 Stuyvesant Town/Turtle Bay (1,006, 4.06%)
107 Upper West Side (2,504, 6.01%)
108 Upper East Side (1,045, 2.25%)
109 Morningside Heights/Hamilton (4,574, 20.6%)
110 Central Harlem (6,292, 26.47%)
111 East Harlem (7,023, 28.45%)
112 Washington Heights/Inwood (9,637, 23.78%)
201 Mott Haven/Melrose (11,667, 39.78%)
202 Hunts Point/Longwood (11,667, 39.78%)
203 Morrisania/Crotona (13,465, 39.94%)
204 Highbridge/Concourse (10,615, 35.62%)
205 Fordham/University Heights (10,794, 37.12%)
206 Belmont/East Tremont (13,465, 39.94%)
207 Kingsbridge Heights/Bedford (8,576, 29.89%)
208 Riverdale/Fieldston (3,114, 12.35%)
209 Parkchester/Soundview (8,442, 20.81%)
210 Throgs Neck/Co-op City (2,000, 7.15%)
211 Morris Park/Bronxdale (4,927, 16.48%)
212 Williamsburg/Baychester (4,650, 13.55%)
301 Greenpoint/Williamsburg (7,160, 25.94%)
302 Fort Greene/Brooklyn Heights (3,141, 14.4%)
303 Bedford Stuyvesant (8,316, 29.97%)
304 Bushwick (7,859, 29.8%)
305 East New York/Starret City (9,345, 25.94%)
306 Park Slope/Carroll Gardens (2,190, 9.21%)
307 Sunset Park (6,476, 20.27%)
308 Crown Heights (6,162, 22.07%)
309 South Crown Heights/Prospect Heights (4,560, 18.07%)
310 Bay Ridge/Dyker Heights (3,190, 10.71%)
311 Bensonhurst (6,035, 13.95%)
312 Borough Park (7,186, 20.62%)
313 Coney Island (4,064, 14.92%)
314 Flatbush/Midwood (6,766, 18.11%)
315 Sheepshead Bay (4,468, 12.19%)
316 Brownsville (8,667, 32.4%)
317 East Flatbush (4,373, 13.22%)
318 Flatlands/Canarsie (4,313, 8.72%)
401 Astoria (5,848, 14.67%)
402 Woodside/Sunnyside (3,357, 11.37%)
403 Jackson Heights (5,182, 13.17%)
404 Elmhurst/Corona (4,834, 15.22%)
405 Ridgewood/Maspeth (4,278, 9.81%)
406 Rego Park/Forest Hills (1,824, 6.22%)
407 Flushing/Whitestone (5,493, 9.13%)
408 Hillcrest/Fresh Meadows (2,828, 7.93%)
409 Kew Gardens/Woodhaven (3,488, 10.72%)
410 South Ozone/Howard Beach (2,892, 9.08%)
411 Bayside/Little Neck (1,521, 4.84%)
412 Jamaica/Hollis (5,149, 10.5%)
413 Queens Village (1,812, 3.79%)
414 Rockaway/Broad Channel (3,903, 15.43%)
501 St. George/Stapleton (5,515, 12.96%)
502 South Beach/Willowbrook (2,386, 6.56%)
503 Tottenville/Great Kills (1,129, 2.47%)

Figure 1

New York City Schools Proposed for Closure



Staten Island shown at 25% scale.

For the purposes of this report, high-needs students refer to those who may face additional educational challenges, particularly homeless students, as well as English Language Learners and those with special educational needs.

The Annual Progress Reports, which grade each school with an A, B, C, D, or F, is an important performance measure used to determine which schools are the 10% "lowest performing."

Introduction

Closing "poorly-performing schools" and opening small schools from which families can choose is not new educational policy for New York City; however its impact on all students has not been thoroughly evaluated. Last spring, controversy erupted over the proposed closure of 20 schools when the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filed a suit against the city. As mandated by a July 2010 court order, this September these schools will remain open. However many of them are struggling with severe under-enrollment, in part as a result of a letter sent by the Department of Education to parents informing them of these schools' eminent closure, thus influencing school choice decisions. The city is also likely to restart the lengthy closure process in the near future. In the meantime, some students will be left behind in these struggling schools, while others may try to eventually transfer. It is therefore imperative that we review the effects of these policy developments on high-needs students, specifically the most overlooked—students experiencing homelessness. For the rising number of students who are already housing displaced, becoming educationally displaced may exacerbate their educational outcomes.

School Closures in the Context of New York City Education Policy

Since 2002, the Bloomberg administration has closed 91 low-performing schools, mostly large high schools, and has opened 325 small ones. Typically, these large schools serve students who selected their neighborhood high school or were rejected from the new, small schools they chose.[1]

In November 2009, the administration announced plans to close the city's 10% "lowest-performing" schools. As part of this plan, 20 schools—one K–8 and the rest middle and high schools—were identified for closure (see Figure 1 for school names and locations).[2] Students would be able to graduate but no new incoming classes would be added, essentially phasing out the schools.[3]

The Annual Progress Reports, which grade each school with an A, B, C, D, or F, is an important performance measure used to determine which schools are the "lowest 10% performing."

In March 2010, however, the New York State Supreme Court blocked the plan. According to the court order, the city violated state law, in part because it submitted incomplete "educational-impact statements," which must document the effects of closings on students and other schools in the area.[4] On July 1, 2010, the appellate court unanimously upheld the lower court's ruling, thereby requiring the schools to remain open for the 2010–11 school year. The ruling, however, did not stipulate that the city could not close these schools, but rather that it needed to comply with the law's prerequisites.[5] In the meantime, seven new schools and two existing schools are opening on or relocating to the proposed-closure schools' grounds. In the meantime, the city has promised to provide extra support, early intervention programs, and training to teachers in the proposed-closure schools.[6] This situation presents the opportunity to consider questions about the impact of school closures on high-needs students, particularly those experiencing homelessness.

Academic Barriers for Homeless Students in the U.S.

The number of homeless children identified in U.S. public schools increased by 41% between the 2006–07 and 2007–08 school years.[7] Homeless students often face multiple barriers to academic success.[8] Even though federal law requires the immediate enrollment of homeless students regardless of their documentation status, residential and guardianship requirements, as well as immunization records, can still be barriers to starting in a new school.[9] Despite the fact that the same law requires schools to provide transportation, a lack of transportation can still be an obstacle to education.[10]

As a consequence of their residential instability, data suggest that homeless students are likely to change schools regularly; according to one study, 41% attend two schools in one year and 28% attend at least three.[11] A 2008 case study of homeless students whose families were served by a housing assistance program in a large city found that 60% changed schools midyear.[12] This mobility can potentially cause enrollment delays and lower achievement when compared with those who do not transfer, as there is a positive relationship between school stability and performance.[13]

A recent longitudinal study found that homeless and highly mobile students in one large urban district, while diverse in needs, tended to score lower in both reading and math than their low-income housed peers. Reading scores were particularly impacted; 18% of homeless and highly mobile students in the second grade had scores lower than two standard deviations below national test norms, suggesting that these students would likely face unique academic challenges to succeeding in school.[14]

Homeless children are also twice as likely to repeat a grade than other children.[15] Grade retention is linked to negative academic outcomes, and is one of the most influential predictors of future dropout.[16] This may be linked to poor attendance; during the 2004–05 school year, the latest with readily available data, New York City homeless high school students had a 65% attendance rate, representing 63 missed school days—enough to potentially fail the grade given that 38 days is the cut-off for severe absenteeism.[17] Moreover, three or more early life residential moves can decrease a child's chance of graduating high school by 13% compared to non-moving peers.[18] Data also have shown that 50% of the homeless population reported dropping out of school at some point.[19] In another study, although formerly homeless students rated school as "very important" they reported having worse school experiences and less ambitious plans for post-high-school than permanently housed students whose families received public assistance.[20]

The U.S. Department of Education reports that homeless students, even when qualified, face barriers to accessing gifted and talented programs, special education, and ELL services.

Homeless students may also have additional needs for special education or English language assistance. Students experiencing homelessness have learning disabilities at twice the rate of housed peers.[21] They may also be English Language Learners (ELLs), of whom more than 50% drop out of high school compared to about one-third of all students.[22] The U.S. Department of Education reports that homeless students, even when qualified, face barriers to accessing gifted and talented programs, special education and ELL services. Additionally, transportation obstacles can make it challenging for them to attend extracurricular activities or programs such as tutoring, counseling, clubs and sports—all of which can contribute positively to their academic success.[23] Given all this, homeless students can be at a disadvantage. School closures, however, raise additional concerns about educational displacement.

Homeless Students in Proposed New York City Closure Schools

During the 2007–08 school year, 51,316 students were reported as homeless in New York City schools.[24] While this number attempts to capture homeless students not only living in shelter but also living doubled up with family or friends or sleeping on the streets, it is not publicly reported on the individual school level. Department of Education data on homeless students living in shelter only, which is available on the school level, report a total of 10,285 pupils out of an enrollment of 985,921 during Fiscal Year 2008.[25] Figure 2 shows that overall the schools proposed for closure have roughly the same percentage of homeless students living in shelter as schools

FIGURE 2

STUDENTS IN SHELTER ENROLLED IN SCHOOLS PROPOSED FOR CLOSURE VS. CITYWIDE
(not including schools proposed for closure)
Fiscal Year 2008

	School name	Enrollment	Students in shelter	Percent of enrollment
Bronx	Alfred E. Smith Career and Technical Education High School (X600)	1,189	4	.34%
	Christopher Columbus High School (X415)	1,554	28	1.80%
	Frederick Douglass Academy III Secondary School (X517)	498	3	.60%
	Global Enterprise High School (X541)	416	3	.72%
	Monroe Academy for Business and Law (X690)	612	3	.49%
	New Day Academy (X245)	429	4	.93%
	High School for Community Research and Learning (X540)	392	2	.51%
Brooklyn	Metropolitan Corporate Academy (K530)	400	3	.75%
	Middle School for Academic and Social Excellence (K334)	252	7	2.78%
	PS 332 Charles H. Houston (K332)	570	23	4.04%
	Paul Robeson High School (K625)	1,363	16	1.17%
	W. H. Maxwell Career and Technical Education High School (K660)	1,122	5	.45%
Manhattan	Kappa II (M317)	195	2	1.03%
	Academy of Collaborative Education (M344)	221	9	4.07%
	Academy of Environmental Science High School (M635)	666	6	.90%
	Choir Academy of Harlem (M469)	426	1	.23%
	Norman Thomas High School (M620)	2,129	16	.75%
Queens	Beach Channel High School (Q410)	1,792	7	.39%
	Business, Computer Applications, and Entrepreneurship High School (Q496)	507	5	.99%
	Jamaica High School (Q470)	1,787	12	.67%
Schools proposed for closure		**16,520**	**159**	**.96%**
Citywide		**969,401**	**10,126**	**1.04%**

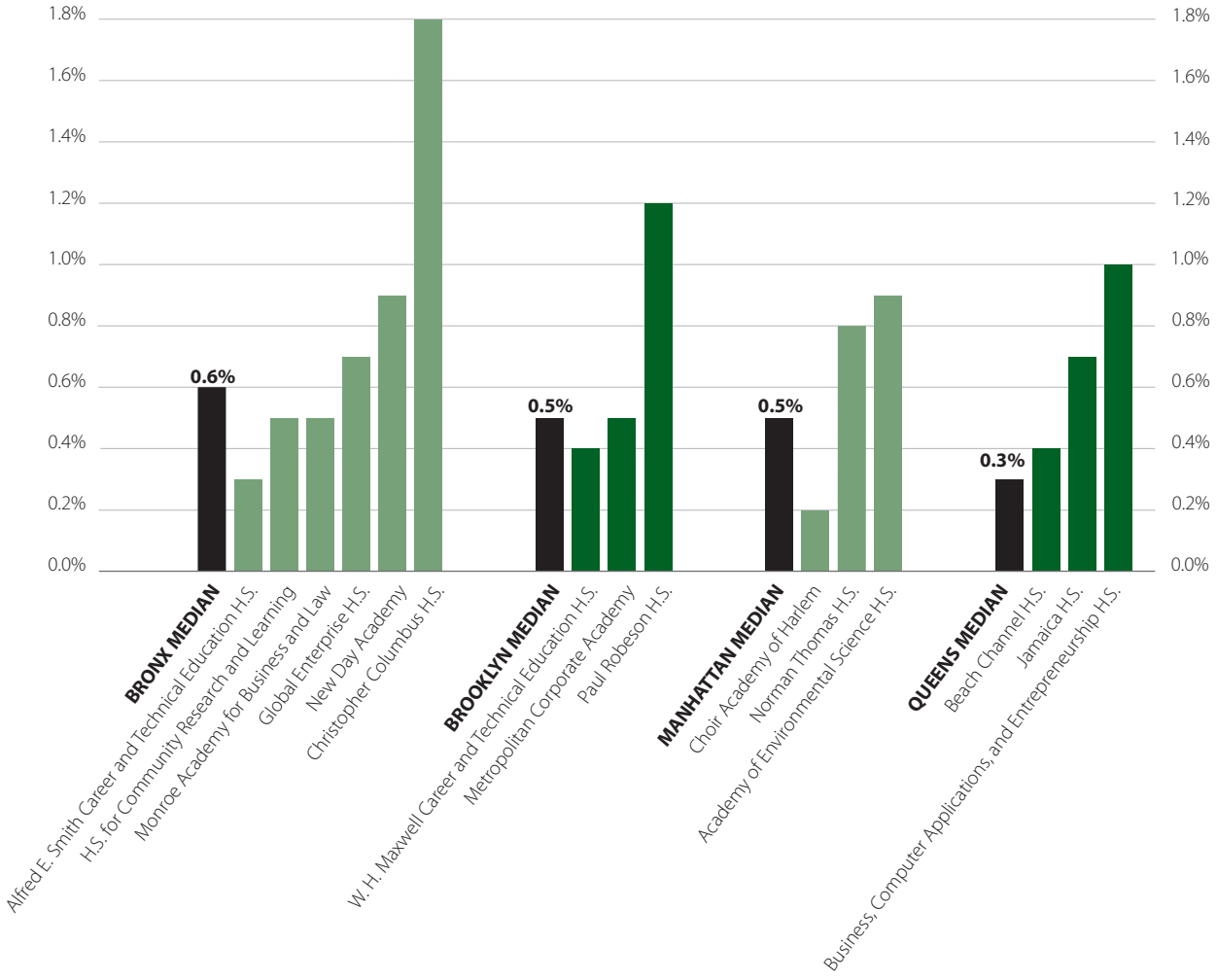
Source: New York City Department of Education, Comprehensive Education Plan, Fiscal Year 2008. Please note that the data are based on point-in-time counts and do not represent current enrollment at these schools. Enrollment is as of October 31, 2007 and students in shelter is as of June 30, 2008. Citywide includes Staten Island.

citywide. However, Figure 3 shows that generally the high schools proposed for closure have greater percentages of homeless students living in shelter than their respective borough medians. For instance, as Figure 3 illustrates, at Christopher Columbus High School, 2% of the student body is homeless and living in shelter compared to a 0.6% Bronx median.

Family homelessness and poverty impact the communities where many of the schools proposed for closure are located. Seventeen of the 20 schools share their Community District with a transitional family shelter (see Figure 1). Many of the schools up for closure are also situated in areas of high poverty; 14 out of 20 schools are located in

Figure 3

PERCENTAGE OF HOMELESS STUDENTS IN HIGH SCHOOLS PROPOSED FOR CLOSURE VS. BOROUGH MEDIAN
(not including schools proposed for closure)



Source: 2008 data from Independent Budget Office, "Comparison between Schools Slated for Closing and All Other Schools." (January 25, 2010). "High School" is abbreviated as "H.S.".

Community Districts with a family-poverty rate at or above the citywide rate of 15.7% based on the federal measure (see Figure 1*).*[26] In addition to the percentage of homeless students, high schools up for closure usually have greater numbers of students who qualify for free lunch, an indicator of poverty, as well as high-needs students such as ELLs, and those with special educational needs, compared to borough medians for non-closing schools. For instance, in 2008 at Paul Robeson High School, 83% of the students qualified for free lunch compared to a 63% Brooklyn median. At Christopher Columbus High School, 16% were ELL and 20% were special educational needs, compared to a respective 9% Bronx borough median for each. Both of these high schools had the highest numbers of homeless students, which significantly exceeded the borough median (see Figure 2).

Displacement of Homeless Students

Unfortunately, there has not been enough research to document the impact of school closures on homeless students. This is particularly concerning given that these students are already housing displaced, at an educational disadvantage, and highly likely to fall through the cracks during transfers and phase-outs. In the absence of any evaluation data on homeless children, evidence of the consequences of prior school closures on other high-needs groups, such as ELL and special education students, also overrepresented in these schools, provides the most relevant examples.

If, or when, the city re-enters the closure process with these schools, it is required to provide clarification about the options available to all students and the effects of school changes. According to a report by the Office of the Public Advocate and the Alliance for Quality Education, 42% of parents affected by co-locations reported that the department did not explain how the changes would impact existing educational programs.[27] Unfortunately, the original Department of Education educational-impact statements were vague about the consequences of closures on all students. Taking a Queens school for example, the proposal for Jamaica High School stated that all ninth through twelfth grade students will be able to graduate from Jamaica "assuming they continue to earn credits on schedule," that current ninth graders could transfer to another school for tenth grade "pending satisfactory completion of promotion criteria and grade-ten seat availability," and that current sophomores and those repeating freshman year "are encouraged to meet with their guidance counselors to explore their options."[28] This boilerplate justification was repeated throughout all the educational-impact statements of the high schools proposed for closure. But what is the reality of these possible outcomes?

Students Left Behind

Based on these statements, not all students will have the opportunity to graduate from high schools like Jamaica (see Figure 1, #17). In fact, as mentioned above, only students earning credits "on schedule" will be able to graduate. The reality illustrates that this will not be an option for many students, as Jamaica High School's four-year graduation rate is 48% and 24% of ninth graders read at grade level.[29] During the 2008 fiscal year, 12 homeless students were enrolled. Unfortunately, students at risk to not graduate in four years, or not able to meet promotion criteria, may likely include high-needs students, causing them to be educationally displaced. The ambiguity in the educational-impact statements suggests that it is possible that a student both could be unable to graduate from his or her high school and unable to transfer to a different school, as transfer rests on meeting promotion criteria and seat availability. Furthermore, the high school educational-impact statements recommending that students meet with their guidance counselors was a process, not outcome-based recommendation, and thus may not serve the students' best interests. How students in different academic standings and years will fare when schools close needs to be properly assessed.

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To avoid closure or handle phase-out, schools might be inclined to discharge high-needs students. According to the Department of Education, a student is discharged when he or she leaves the school system mainly to attend another educational setting, including going to a private school, enrolling in a school outside New York City, or entering into a GED program.[30] Although discharging can occur for many valid reasons, the Department of Education has been sued multiple times for using the practice to exclude low-performing students, resulting in

manipulated test-score averages and graduation rates.[31] The city discharge rate has been increasing: 21% (20,488 students) of the class of 2007 was discharged, while only 17.5% (15,450 students) of the class of 2000 was discharged.[32] One of the few analyses of the effects of closure on high-needs students in New York City reveals that one high school that was phased out discharged ELL students to GED programs even if they were under the legal admissible age, denying them access to high school diplomas, even though this could negatively impact lifetime earnings and opportunities. Students also reported being told that they had to either graduate with a Regents diploma or get a GED by the time of school closure, even though students are legally allowed to continue in public school until they are 21, giving them the opportunity to transfer at closure.[33] Unfortunately, high-needs students including the homeless may be the most vulnerable to discharge. Improperly discharging students to GED programs not only renders statistics misleading; it also cuts costs. Educating a student for a year costs the public school system $17,000; however, a GED preparation course costs $1,000 on average.[34] For an overburdened educational system, this approach, which could generate substantial savings for the school system, offers a tempting alternative to mainstream high school education.

Educating a student for a year costs the public school system $17,000; however, a GED preparation course costs $1,000.

Additionally, students left in phasing-out or under-enrolled schools are likely to experience a diminishing quality of education. As of July 16, only ten students were enrolled for ninth grade at New Day Academy in the Bronx, although more may enroll before the year starts.[35] Because schools receive funding based on the number of students, severe under-enrollment at some of the schools is likely to impact quality. Even though the city has promised to provide these targeted schools with extra support, the benefits of this are unlikely to be immediate. In general, a phasing-out or under-enrolled school can mean fewer course offerings and extracurricular activities, as students, teachers and staff are likely to leave the school. These services are harder for homeless students to access in the first place, but when utilized, may fill an important gap in students' academic and emotional development. Remaining behind in a school that has been labeled a failure could also perpetuate stigma, a feeling not unfamiliar to homeless students.

Students Who Transfer

What happens to the student who leaves the phasing-out or under-enrolled school? If the student is properly supported in the decision making and transition and is also able to enroll in a high-quality school, the benefits may outweigh the risks. As previously mentioned, however, transfers can play a negative role in school achievement, and may present an additional obstacle to graduation. Students in schools being phased out will likely need additional support so that they successfully transfer, rather than dropout. However, school guidance counselors and staff may face increasing workloads during the transition, which may hinder their ability to properly support each student.

Closing large schools and opening up small ones raises capacity issues over seat availability, particularly if a student wishes to stay in a certain neighborhood. Because many students will not be reassigned to one of the new schools created in the same building, they could end up at a school much farther away from their temporary residence, displacing them from the neighborhood. As such, homeless students may become increasingly disconnected from their communities, which are a source of support and stability for them.[36]

Alongside these general concerns, it is necessary to question whether high-needs students, such as the homeless, experience the same access to the new small schools as their housed peers. In fact, for a time, the Department of Education allowed new small schools to temporarily exclude ELLs and students with special educational needs.[37]

In addition, experience suggests that small schools could be tempted to manipulate admissions and selectively leave out high-needs students by giving preference to families who can participate more fully in the educational process, such as by attending an information session.[38] Students excluded from small schools may end up in nearby low-performing, large high schools that may also be at risk for closure.[39]

Furthermore, small schools have been accused of not complying with the state's law to serve high-needs students. Specifically, there were allegations in 2007 that the four small schools already placed on the Christopher Columbus campus in the Bronx were not satisfying the state mandate of providing the proper ELL classes.[40] Such an instructional limitation could have the net effect of discouraging ELL students from transferring to these schools while simultaneously allowing the small schools to maintain higher test score averages, thus incentivizing "high achievers" to enroll.

Well thought out and detailed educational-impact statements that specifically address the effects on homeless students and ensure we do not create additional educational hurdles for them must accompany proposed school closures.

Meanwhile, for homeless students who are unsure where their families may be living after leaving shelter or other temporary arrangements, including moving to other shelters or doubled-up situations, making transfer decisions is challenging. Anecdotal evidence suggests that older homeless students are more likely to be living doubled up than their younger counterparts; therefore, they may not have their parents available to guide and support them. This is particularly concerning given the importance of strong adult guidance in navigating school choice.[41] Additionally, homeless students not living in shelters would not benefit from shelter educational liaisons, information, and support.

Conclusion

While school closure can be seen as a way to ensure that no student stays in a poorly-performing school, it can also create multiple avenues for possible educational displacement, regardless of whether the homeless student attempts to graduate from the phasing-out school or transfer to another. School closures are not inherently bad for high-needs students, but they must be well planned and implemented in order to avoid educational displacement. In March, the Office of the Public Advocate called for educational-impact statements that identify the school options available to affected low-performing and high-needs students in order to ensure that they do not end up in large schools without the resources to meet their needs.[42] With the city likely to restart the closure process on these 20 schools, while also forging ahead with other closures, it must not only ensure adherence to the law but also support individual students.

Despite the fact that homeless students may be the most vulnerable to the negative consequences of closures, the impact on their educational opportunity and academic success is largely overlooked. Well thought out and detailed educational-impact statements that specifically address the effects on homeless students and ensure we do not create additional educational hurdles for them must accompany proposed school closures. Furthermore, among the data the Department of Education may track on school closures, it should at a minimum document and make public placement attendance and graduation indicators for homeless students to ensure that there are no disparate effects during phase-outs and transfers. As it stands now, the closing of public schools, with the resulting impact on homeless students in the 20 schools reviewed here, raises more questions than it answers. Because homeless students appear to be at greatest risk, it is necessary to question what we do not know, to find answers, and to support them as they bear the burden of the city's policy decisions.

Endnotes

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[2] Please note that previously, Alfred E. Smith Career and Technical Education High School's automotive program was removed from the closure list by the Department of Education but the school's other programs remained. Walz, Maura, "DOE Grants Reprieve to Alfred E. Smith's Automative Program," *GothamSchools,* January 20, 2010. This accounts for the fact that the number of schools on the list is sometimes cited as 19, rather than 20. Additionally, at Fredrick Douglass Academy III, only the middle school was on the list and at the Choir Academy of Harlem only the high school was slated for closure.

[3] Independent Budget Office, *Comparison between Schools Slated for Closing and All Other Schools,* January 25, 2010.

[4] Supreme Court of the State of New York-New York County, *Mulgrew vs. Board of Education,* Index no 101352.10, March 26, 2010. As these educational impact statements will need to be revised if the city re-enters the closure process, we refer to them in the past tense in this report.

[5] The New York State Supreme Court Appellate Division, First Department, Mulgrew vs. Board of Education, M-2599, July 1, 2010.

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[7] National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, *A Critical Moment: Child & Youth Homelessness in Our Nation's Schools,* July 2010. The increase can not be attributed to the increase in federal ARRA stimulus money which occurred after.

[8] Because research about homeless children is often not regularly conducted, some data in this section is dated, although the most recent relevant research readily available is referenced.

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[21] The National Center on Family Homelessness, *America's Youngest Outcasts,* 2009.

[22] Avitia, Deycy and Norman Eng, "Small Schools Exclude Many Immigrants," *Gotham Gazette,* December 4, 2006; Note that this is over the course of seven years given that students can in most cases stay in the system until they are 21.

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[24] NYS-TEACHS, "2007–2008 BEDS Data on Homelessness: New York City." http://www.nysteachs.org/info-topic/statistics.html

[25] This is point in time data and includes pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade.

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